

LOOK BACK!

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Over the years Word Ways has displayed a varied logological corpus. In this column I revisit forgotten ideas, connect seemingly-disparate concepts, and suggest further investigations.

In the August 1981 Kickshaws, Faith Eckler presented a 19th-century riddle from Great Britain:

In the morn when I rise,
I open my eyes,
 Tho' I ne'er sleep a wink all night;
If I wake e'er so soon,
I still lie till noon,
 And pay no regard to the light.

I have loss, I have gain,
I have pleasure, and pain;
 And am punished with many a stripe;
To diminish my woe,
I burn friend and foe,
 And my evenings I end with a pipe.

I travel abroad.
And ne'er miss my road,
 Unless I am met by a stranger;
If you come in my way,
Which you very well may,
 You will always be subject to danger.

I am chaste, I am young,
I am lusty, and strong,
 And my habits oft change in a day;
To court I ne'er go,
Am no lady nor beau,
 Yet as frail and fantastic as they.

I live a short time,
I die in my prime,
 Lamented by all who possess me;
If I add any more,
To what's said before
 I'm afraid you will easily guess me.

This appeared in Drawing Room Scrap Sheet No. 17, and was headed "For Which a Solution is Required", suggesting that the editor did not know the answer. Was it sent in anonymously, or perhaps copied from some earlier publication? According to Mark Bryant in *Dictionary of Riddles* (Routledge, 1990), the Drawing Room Scrap Sheet was a series of 26 colored sheets with

ornamental borders containing two pages each of poetry, puzzles, etc., sold in selected bookshops (weekly?) from November 5, 1831 onward. The four examples Bryant gives are phonetic charades on coffee (*cough, fee*), walnut (*wall, nut*), bonnet (Fr. *Bonne, nette*) and a riddle answered by a pack of playing cards.

A year's subscription to Word Ways was offered to anyone who solved the riddle, but there were no claimants. Nor did any member of the National Puzzlers' League succeed in solving it. Brief Internet research has also failed to reveal the answer.

I suggest that the answer to the riddle may be the abstract concept **fame** in the short-lived sense of "notoriety" rather than the long-lived sense of "renown". (Remember Andy Warhol's dictum that everyone is entitled to 15 minutes of fame?) The two versions of fame are distinguished in Roget's original (1852) thesaurus, in Section 873 under Repute, and Sections 531 or 532 under Publication or News. (Interestingly, riddle itself is found in the adjacent Section 533 under Secret.) The two-faced nature of fame makes it an ideal subject for the ambiguities exploited by the riddle. (However, fame is *not* the subject of any of the 1448 historical riddles in Bryant.) The mutability of fame is suggested by the opposites of loss vs. gain or pleasure vs. pain; its evanescence is perhaps characterized by the adjectives frail and fantastic.

The author of the riddle cleverly uses ambiguous phrases to mislead the solver: I *still* lie till noon (inert, or continue to?); evenings I end with a *pipe* (a tobacco holder, or a thin reedy sound?); to court I ne'er go (a royal venue, a legal venue, or courtship?).

It is difficult to reduce the various word-pictures in the stanzas to a single concept. I aver that the final stanza lies nearest the truth, for the author hints that revealing any more will give the game away. Fame in its notorious sense certainly lives a short time and quickly dies (ending with a whimper, a piping sound?), to be supplanted by a new sensation; nevertheless the subject of fame will lament (regret) its loss (unless it is of an embarrassing nature). When met by a stranger (i.e., a person living in obscurity), fame exposes him to potential danger (unwanted notoriety—"I burn friend or foe"). If fame is spread by word of mouth (or publication), this is more likely to occur in the afternoon or evening; it is quiescent in the morning.

But obscurities are still present. Why is fame "punished with many a stripe"? And why is it chaste? Perhaps fame does not respond to direct solicitation by the wannabe—it cannot be courted (like a beau does with a lady).

Can anyone come up with a different plausible explanation of this riddle?